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SN Fiction

A Few Words Before Dinner

by Margaret Drury Gane

He was glad that on this visit he had some good news for him. A couple of times a month, Trevor Stanton made a point of dropping in at the old house, carrying guilt-gifts of Turkish delight, or cigarettes, occasionally a bottle of good whisky. His father was a moderate drinker who limited himself to one glass every evening, so that liquor never seemed to seduce him into a change of mood. Curiously, it was the candy that altered him, at least temporarily. He'd sit back, stoned on the opaque gelatine sweetness, smelling like a rose, his sweater frosted with powdered sugar, to talk freely, almost happily. And because he was eighty-two, he rambled through a past that ranged from child labour in a Kent mill, through the whole First World War with the 17th Lancers, emigration to Canada, the Depression, his business. Most of it came out sounding like the answer to an English prayer. Chaos lessened to simple hard times by courageous and never-say-die coping. How these doomed events could make him smile was a continuing mystery to his son; but they did. Lingering smiles as he re-visited the procession of bullies who caught him on his way home. Black eyes and stained-glass bruises worn like medals. Lances, puttees, malaria—and the morning when he woke in India to find George Ramsay knifed in the still mountain night by a silent enemy. His disdain for the tanks and roaring armour that had replaced his beloved horses. Where—he would ask his son, the last person who could give him an answer—where have all the horses gone?

That was why Stanton did not bring candy on this visit. He had something new to say, and he didn't want to wedge it between bread lines and a treatise on Mackenzie King. As the youngest son, much younger, he knew without malice that he had inherited the grind. Michael was settled long ago in Vancouver with a public relations outfit, and Rodney had left to head a German subsidiary firm that manufactured circuit boards for synthesizers. Since his father understood neither of these exotic pursuits, his pride in them was immense. He would talk of their distant success, which he tended to measure by miles trekked, so he did not really miss them. His sons' brief letters were read aloud, and he did not appear to notice that they were stale and dully repetitive. If he complained at all, it was to say that there was never enough mail. Quantity was the thing. Content took second place to the act of paper being shoved through the hall door slot to flop on the floor. The sight of his name scrawled or printed excited him, indicating that he continued to mean something in this world.

Stanton glanced at his watch, tapping his fingers to the sound of Tom Jones on the dashboard radio. Traffic was dense and twitchy, until he made a left-hand turn off the main road and up the car-lined side street close to his home. He'd moved a year ago, enjoying the apartment where he could play records until Sunday dawn and leave whitened beer bottle circles on his tables. No kindly remonstrations, no regular feeding hours, like the zoo. Stanton had decided that people should not have surprise children in their late forties. Eventually it turned the last one into two people, one a crutch to lean on, and the other a baby Dorian Gray for whom all things were possible. Sometimes, it seemed to Stanton that he must sustain his father with contradiction—carry garbage cans and a teddy bear at the same time.

Well, he loved him. And he had to admit he took the news of his moving with a minimum of fuss. If he worried about him, living alone in that empty house, Stanton wouldn't mention nursing home under any circumstances. The place was his little bit of England, a phrase his father liked to use, generally after his fifth candy, and nothing would make him give it up. He slowed down, wheeling the company demonstrator into Dexter Street, experiencing the familiar bitter leap of nostalgia as he drew toward the clean, gaunt house. God, the place looked English enough. The square of lawn, green, weedless, and hedged, lay neatly by a tumble of perennials, trumpeting his father's care. There was the lilac, a stubborn and arthritic clump that still managed to bear a couple of bleached blooms every spring. And there was his father's hand, as always curling like a human tie-back around the living-room curtain, watching for him.

Stanton went into his act then. Accelerating slightly, he turned sharply into the driveway, revving the motor, and jumped from the car like a visiting politician, grinning, smoothing his jacket front with his hand. He jogged lightly around the rump of the Shrimp his dealer was pushing this year, trotted by his father's drooping Union Jack, and bopped the bell. He did the same thing every time, to please the old man, to prove he couldn't wait to get there. His father liked people well and running.

When the door opened, Stanton hesitated, seeking out the old man's figure in the shadowy hall.

"You're squinting," his father said.

"Just trying to find you. Forgot my sunglasses. Hey, the garden's looking great. The, uh, things with all the colours—"

"The stocks? Yes, it's been a good year for them." His father moved back against the door to make room for Stanton to pass. But as his son stepped in, he suddenly shot an arrow arm across his face. "See what the bastards have put up?" Stanton turned to see a flag larger than his father's, its maple leaf a zig-zag of indistinguishable crimson in the still afternoon. "Supposed to make me mad," his father grumbled, slamming the door. "Why do you need sunglasses, anyway?" He walked into the living room and indicated a chair. Stanton undid his tie and sat down.

"There's a lot of rebound glare when you're driving around in this sun."

His father smiled faintly, shaking his head. "Yes, I suppose there is. I tend to think gadgets like that weaken us, though. Glasses, girdles, elevators. The muscles get lax, start to droop." He sat down slowly on his hard oak chair as if it were a saddle—straddling his legs, letting his hands rest easily on his lap. He doubled a fist and pounded it abruptly against his thigh. "*Still* hard. That's walking, of course. And years of riding."

"You look good," said Stanton, relaxing in the cool room. Lace things spread over the chair arms, the mantel clock—none of it changed. He remembered his gift, sloping in the crook of his arm. "I bought you some Dewar's." He pulled the bottle from the thin brown bag and placed it on the walnut coffee table before his father, where it stood like a shadeless lamp.

"Well, that is nice of you. Reinforcements, eh? Even Doctor Creighton doesn't object to my nightly nip." Stanton knew why. His father shopped for a physician the way he did for shoes, looking for the perfect fit. Creighton was agreeable, partly retired, easily intimidated, and, most important, spent the appointment time nodding. "Well then, selling lots of cars, are you?"

"Yes," Stanton lied. His father was not fond of failure. Stanton hoped he'd skim the subject without plumbing the depths.

"Chivers still likes you?"

"Seems to." Stanton smiled, thinking how his father would hate Chivers if he really knew him. Chivers, with his chrome eyes and four on the floor morals, doling out Salesman of the Month stickers that ended any chance of friendship in the place. "I'm thinking seriously of leaving, though. The hours are terrible."

"Shouldn't think that would bother a boy of your age. Commission is rough, but I've been through all of that myself. And jobs aren't that easy to come by, are they, times being what they are—" He let that trail off with a look of watery caution, the indefinite summary he applied to everything; a war, recession, a boom, the market rising or falling. Stanton decided it was time to change the subject.

"I know, but I don't think I want to spend my nights peddling cars. I'm getting married." His father's laser eyes had strayed to the offending flag, leaping the distance to scald it out of sight. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"I'm getting married. In two weeks."

"Really, then? Well, congratulations!" He struggled to assemble an expression of gruff regimental questioning. "Have I met the intended?"

"No, but we'll fix that little matter very soon. In fact, I thought we might have dinner together this week-end, get acquainted. I think you'll like her. She's a dental assistant. She wants to meet you, so we can discuss our plans, feel comfortable together—"

"What plans?"

"Well, the wedding. We both want you with us, naturally. Jan's sister is coming in from Ottawa, so I guess our side should shore up a little."

"Like a war, or a criminal case, eh?" The old man's laugh turned into a phlegmy five-minute cough and much hawking and mopping into a linen handkerchief. "Well, there isn't much of our side left to invite, I should think. Aunt Cora, perhaps. But I can't see her coming. She's got colour telly in the Lodge and she's glued to it like an owl. She's ninety, y'know. But you don't visit her—so she says—so there'd be no point in asking her to a wedding, would there?"

"I hadn't thought about it, no. She's probably got me mixed up with Mike, or Rod. I scarcely knew her. Anyway, it's not a big wedding, just quiet. We've booked for two weeks this Thursday, at four-thirty."

"Thursday? Isn't that an odd day? I didn't know churches married people in the middle of the week. But then women turn up for services in pants now, without hats—"

"Might be more interesting the other way around," Stanton said. "Well, don't get uptight about formalities, Dad. It's a civic ceremony, at the old City Hall. Simple, quick, and cheap. Jan's parents aren't loaded, so we decided this for ourselves. Jan and I."

His father moved back in his chair, pursing his thin mauve lips and making fan vaulting of the bony fingers propped beneath his chin. He looked like a wood carving, bloodless and still, elegantly carved, an extension of his chair. Stanton could sense his hostility, and it surprised him. Not once had it occurred to him that a casual ceremony would distress him, certainly not on grounds of his religion, which he had left to languish in some hushed Anglican past. Stanton watched him in confusion, seeing the fierce pale eyes widen, and water, as they did when he heard the Christmas message from Buckingham Palace. Or the time Stanton had taken him to the Mountie ride-past. None of this was what he had expected. He'd thought they'd break open the bottle and share an afternoon drink. There might be a short, evasive

lecture on sex, delivered under stress, far too late. Okay. Fine, because he expected that. But he was supposed to be *pleased*, damn it all, not sit there like he was trying not to dissolve—

"Surely," his father said evenly, "you might have planned something less crass? I'm no churchgoer, never have been, except for regimental parades. And even if economics are a factor, church weddings can be small yet tasteful. City *Hall?* Where people are tried in court, and you pay parking fines? I don't believe it." He leaned forward, reddening so that veins snaked up his temples. "It isn't too late to change, to make other arrangements. Out of respect for your mother's memory, if for no other reason."

So, Stanton thought, there it was. Again. He had forgotten; in his own excitement, he had overlooked this morbid game. Mike and Rod went along with it, Stanton knew that from letters. *He's old, for God's sake, and takes care of himself. Let him alone.* But Jan didn't agree, especially now. And Stanton, who was no smoother, knew he couldn't go along with it, either. His father was pressing now, urging him. All the moisture seemed to have centred in his eyes, leaving his throat dry and dreadful, so that he rambled like an ancient foreigner becalmed in his own house.

"Can't you understand?" he demanded. "We were dirt poor when we married, your mother and I. But we had something memorable. Music, a few friends around, the sense of permanence with the vows! And flowers. We were surrounded by the scent of roses."

"I know—"

"Sun pouring through tinted windows, everything that makes the day stand out for the rest of your life."

"There's a bloody big one in the main foyer." Stanton wondered bleakly why he always made jokes when he was nervous. "They might let us have the service there."

"Don't make light of this, Trevor! Don't you make fun of me, I won't have it! That window is some kind of war memorial, though I confess it always smacked of Russia to me. All those industrial chimneys, and labourers. No. There'll be nothing even *close* to the feel of a church. Know what you'll get? Pots of dying chrysanthemums, a few words before dinner, and they'll hustle you out into the hall."

He was huffing for breath now, unable to sit still. His hard old hands explored the cardigan pockets for cigarettes, and he lit one, cupping the match against a non-existent wind. His eyes turned in misery to the photograph planted between twin pots of geranium on the mantel. It was a young picture of his wife, taken when her hair was brown, evenly parted, and crimped into stiff curls. She wore blue crepe with something puffing at the throat, and long pearls. It was not Stanton's favourite, since it was not typical of the memory he had of her. Still, her eyes had not changed as she aged. Dark and pleasant and patient, giving no sign of the turmoil inside. Grey smoke from his father's cigarette was deeply inhaled, to emerge in a thin blue streak after some strange chemical change in the caverns of his lungs.

"I'll say no more about it," his father said "It's up to you now— I'll make some tea."

It was a relief to be left symbolically in his room. No whisky, then. He heard the elaborate ritual taking place out in the kitchen, where the brown betty would be heated, the silver strainer brought out, the pot carried to the steaming kettle. The army had left his father with a straight back and a passion for order.

"Here we are, then." The old man placed the tray beside his son with only a slight shaking of cups and spoons. "Let it steep a minute or two longer. It's a fresh pack, Breakfast brand. A little indulgence. Mrs. Addison does this very badly, I'm afraid. Tastes of tannic."

"Would you like me to find another housekeeper, Dad?"

"No, not at all. She's quite kind, in fact—certainly bearable three times a week. Besides, I've got her broken in now. She has an odd preoccupation with fluff, swoops about under the bed claiming it's full of germs. Remember Miss Prentice was a plant waterer? Killed every damned cactus in the place." He chuckled, halving a Peak Frean with one bite and swilling it around in amiable concentration. "Can Jean cook? Make a good pot of tea?"

"Jan? I guess so. I honestly haven't given it much thought."

"You're marrying late for a Stanton, y'know. How old are you—twenty-six or so?"

"Thirty-four. Last January."

"Let's see. Michael tied the knot at nineteen, much against your mother's wishes. But I could understand it. Same sort of slap-dash I had at that age. All balls. Marriage settled him down. Rodney was more serious, of course. Didn't do it till he was twenty-two." His father regarded him softly. "Can't recall what *you* were like, in that way. But I was forty-eight when you were born—not bad for my age, eh? Not a very demanding baby, I think, which we appreciated. The business was just getting back on its feet then, so it was pretty much up to your mother to pull you into shape. Say, do you remember the rocking-horse I bought you when you were five?"

"That was Mike's. I had it later, though. Rod told me it had been through several campaigns and that's where the ear and tail had been lopped off."

"Have a biscuit, Trev. They're good. So—now you're the last Stanton to take the big leap. Well, I'm glad. I really am. I guess you've been having one high old time, but a man's got to settle sometime. I recall if we really wanted to gentle a stallion, all the sand-bags and leg-hobbling in the world couldn't compare to showing the bastard a good brood mare. Oh, he wouldn't turn to butter on the spot, but at least he channelled his energy in one direction!"

"Yes—"

"Nobody should live alone too long. I can vouch for that. Your mother and I had a good marriage. Oh, there were tight times, the Depression to get through—" he smiled, remembering. "But we made it, didn't we? Had a nice bunch of boys, too. I just hope that you and Jean—" The smile vanished, and he bit his lips to stop his chin from wobbling. Stanton said *Christ* to himself, knowing the signs, wishing good old Rod and Mike could drop through the bloody ceiling to see what he had to contend with. All those

dutiful dull letters, sent off like company reports—what good were they when his father wanted to cry? He saw his father's face wrinkling, blotching with effort, and waited for the inevitable.

"For the love of God, Trevor! I wish you'd start this thing right, the way we did! For *her* sake!"

Maybe, Stanton thought, he should take his brothers' advice and let the old man march by choice into senility. But he did not know how to do it. Maybe it was easier by mail, thousands of miles away, deciding these things. But he was *there*, and nothing in him, nothing in his father's example, even, had prepared him to pretend.

"Now knock it off, Dad. Okay? Just stop. Because we've invited her, too. Jan wrote her in Calgary, and she's coming out next week. Alone, if that makes you feel any better. Ralph doesn't feel he should interfere since it's—well, our family. You know, damn it, she *should* be able to stay here, not in a hotel. Don't you see that nobody thinks anything about divorce now? It just happens, and to an awful lot of nice people. If you keep up this crap you'll drive yourself nuts—"

Childhood shuddered back into the room as Stanton saw his father's eyes pinning him in black anger. "How dare you say that?" It was a raw, ugly sound. "How *dare* you?"

"Somebody has to. It's the truth, goddam it. Maybe your marriage is dead, but my mother is alive, and she's coming to the wedding. What in hell are you going to say if she dies before you do, which isn't too likely? Are you going to say you're divorced?"

His father rose to leave, taking the tray and cups with tea still sloshing around in them, and left Stanton to look helplessly around at the fading beige walls, the paintings of the English countryside with their greenish pallor and grazing cows and ivory follies. Stanton got up and paced the room to calm himself. He could not remember speaking to his father like that, and he felt limp, relieved, and guilty, as though he'd vomited on the rug. Crazy things plagued him. What if he had a heart attack because of him? What if he suffered a stroke, and spent his remaining years blanketed in a wheelchair, glaring accusations from a lopsided face? He should have taken his father's age into account. But damn it all, when did his father ever take *his* age into account? Never. He was always thinking him younger than he actually was; always.

He was on the point of going after the old man when he heard him coming slowly down the stairs, and Stanton turned to see a look of placid hospitality. His father was waving a small notebook.

"I've begun a little hobby, to keep my mind clear. At my age, one is apt to forget things, to find concentrating difficult. Did you know that the brain cells begin to deteriorate at

a very early age? Lack of work, like legs, I expect. So—each day I look up an unfamiliar word, write it down, and use it on somebody, usually poor Mrs. Addison. If I'm alone, the goldfish have to hear it. I'm up to the r's now. Refulgence. Do you know that?"

"No—"

"Well, your work makes that unlikely, I should think. Our Wheels Do You A Good Turn hardly represents literary inventiveness, does it?" Suddenly, his father took a swift step forward and locked Stanton in an awkward embrace, inadvertently jabbing him in the shoulder blade with the edge of the notebook.

"I'm sorry we've quarrelled. I think I've been a good father, wouldn't you agree?"

"Sure you have. You always have." Stanton let him move first. He knew somehow that was important. "What does the word mean?"

"Refulgence? Radiant, of a shining quality. Like your bride, perhaps."

"Will you come, Dad? Will you think about it?"

Stanton worked his way back through rush-hour traffic, knowing Chivers wouldn't mind, since he thought he was out demonstrating. That night he sold a refulgent Shrimp to a young suburban couple, whose apricot poodle lifted a shorn leg to piddle on the whitewalls. The couple laughed, and Stanton laughed and said wasn't that the way a dog marked off his territory. He felt better, making a sale after a day like that. But Chivers, breathing onion, came over all restless gleam and darting eyes to lace congratulations with a little hemlock.

"Christ, Trev, you could have brought them up to something bigger! What the hell do you mean talking them into a six? Especially when the eights aren't moving? They'd have bought my table with skis on it, if I had 'em. Well, use the old follow-up when it's delivered. Keep the hooks in. Don't let them get satisfied!"

Chivers eyed himself in a side-view mirror of the car he leaned on, narrowing his eyes and jutting his chin as he tugged at the tie, a kind of frowning satisfaction worrying his meaty face. "Sure, we're supposed to push Shrimps," he said. "But a smart guy knows they're lost leaders, eh? Let them think it's a kennel for their stupid dog, get 'em wondering why they don't move up to the big time. Psychology, Stanton. *That's* what sells, and that's what'll win you a trip to Florida." Chivers straightened up and punched him companionably. "Don't get left on the beach, that's my advice, high and dry. I'd like to see your name up there with the month's winners, okay?"

A heat wave hit Toronto the day before the wedding, side-winding up through the central states, settling like a wet washcloth over the city. A baleful orange sun throbbed through the day and dropped at night like a piece of rotten fruit. By Thursday afternoon, humidity had built so that bits of shade were as cloying as mould, and sailboats on the bay drooped ~~and bobbed~~ like shot birds on the still water. Stanton and Fred Bailey, a mechanic with Chivers who had the afternoon off, drove through the burning streets, joking with each other in high senseless voices neither recognized. In Stanton's mind, working quite apart from the voice that bantered, two conflicting thoughts kept teletyping a message: *get there on time . . . don't hit anybody for chrissake!* The real meaning of what he was about to do had struck him early in the day, when he shaved before the bathroom mirror. It happened suddenly, as if he had plunged himself headfirst into a barrel of crushed ice. He was going to commit himself to someone else, if not totally, then about as totally as any human being could. They had fought feebly once or twice about her mess and his neatness, ending arguments or prickling silence in a lunge for each other's bodies, in oneness where no conflict got in the way. Stanton had watched his own hand quivering in the mirror, startled that he had nerves. Like his father. The Stanton Nerves that began somewhere in the centre of the back and fanned out like electricity, numbing the fingertips and knotting neck muscles. In a second of panic, he saw clearly her pantyhose over the shower rail, her contraceptive foam beside his shaving foam, her records mixed in with his. The moment passed, as his mother's cool, plotting blood swept quietly over the nerves: it was worth it. Whatever love was, he felt it for Jan, who was, if he were truthful, just slightly messier than he . . .

"Hey, turn here," directed Bailey. He was enjoying himself. Hunched on the edge of the seat, wearing a windbreaker of imitation leather over an open-necked shirt, keeping the bridegroom happy. How the hell he could stand that thing on him in this weather baffled Stanton, but he felt only gratitude that he had agreed to be a witness. Bailey was one of those men who never seemed to get depressed, or worry about pensions and the weather. He'd walk on those strong bandy legs through a snowstorm or a heat wave with the same jauntiness, wearing the windbreaker, his red kinky hair threaded with frozen or melting brilliantine. He was a man who was most at home with heavy tools in his hand, in the oily murk and clang of the shop; and afterwards, strangling a bottle of beer, exchanging dirty jokes in an almost innocent, street-corner yearning for information.

Stanton liked him better than the salesmen because he was not tainted with competition, not made furtive by the need to get ahead. He was where he was—and anyway, he'd offered at nearly the last minute to step in for Stanton's friend, who had contracted mumps from a young son and was at home watching his ears slowly disappearing behind a bloated face.

"Right here," Bailey waved a blunt bitten finger at a vacancy in the underground parking—"and for God's sake take it easy! Chivers can spot a hairline scratch."

They walked through the steamy odours of downtown, jogged across Bay after a long red light and up the stairs in to the old City Hall. At once, their voices, pitched for the clamour outside, rang back at them in harsh echoes. "Up there," said Stanton, pointing to the marble stairs breaking like waves on either side of the stained glass window—"to the right—"

In the upstairs hallway, they opened the glass door with *Weddings* printed across it in the same stern,

reproaching type used on doors of offices where fines were paid in sulky silence by law-breakers. The crowd inside dismayed Stanton for a moment, as he stood uncertainly, awash in sweat and nerves. People were everywhere, lounging in chairs, propped against the walls, standing in excited bunches. Stanton half expected to see them dangling from the lights, or hung like pictures, from hooks.

"See anybody y'know?" asked Bailey, dancing at his side. Someone they could not see droned "Gaylord? The Gaylord party, please." And a thin boy with acne and a look of haunted, desperate passion leaped to his feet, pulling a round-faced solemn girl who looked as if she might be going into a dentist's office.

"Christ!" whispered Bailey. "They could be my kids! They gotta be nuts, eh?" A look of sudden and punishing puritanism, of middle-aged outrage at the indecency of it all, made Bailey appear very different. It was impossible to link him with the man who grinned and liked to tell a raunchy joke about the old man and the young girl, slapping his thick thighs at the punch line. Stanton's eyes swept the smoky room until he found her, and simultaneously he and Jan broke into grins of relief. "Over this way"—he nudged Fred and made for the corner, moving sideways, cleaving through the crowd. Somehow they had managed to get chairs, and Stanton, after boisterous introductions and explanations, sat down.

"We late?" he asked. "They haven't passed us, have they?" He grinned at Jan's sister, who looked as if she'd worn leaf lettuce; her dress was petalled in some mysterious way, and fluttered distractingly when she moved. "No," she looked limply at Jan, who she might be thinking was a traitor, wearing a plain beige pantsuit. "We only got here ten minutes ago. Sure is hot. *And* crowded." Stanton turned to his mother, who had lit a cigarette and surveyed the room with removed pleasure. "How did you manage to get chairs, Mom?"

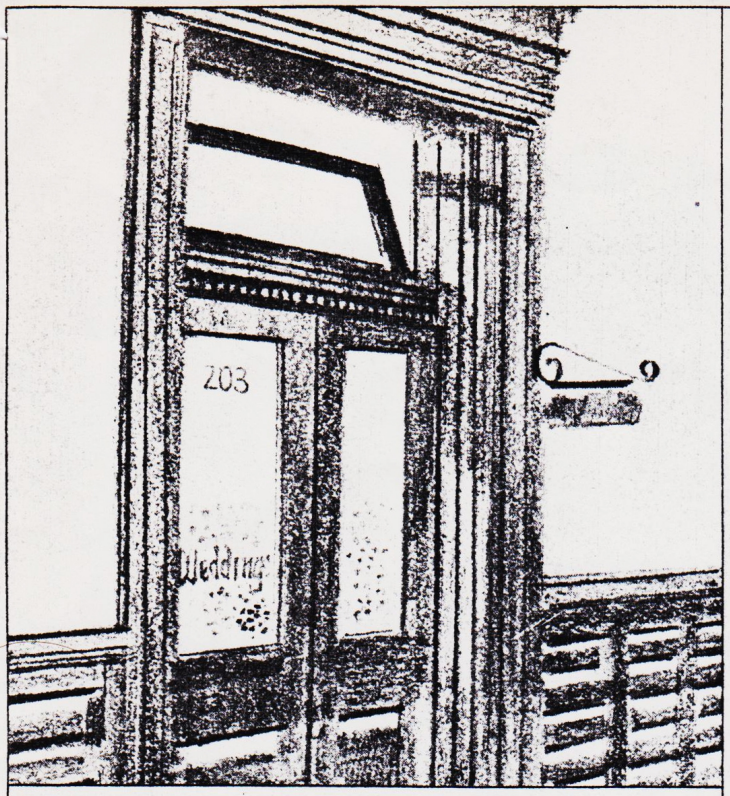
"*I* certainly didn't get them," she laughed, a dimply light laugh out of character with her rather severe, watchful face. Stanton liked her, looking expensively good at seventy-six, groomed and hatted and smart, with the thinly elegant legs of a thoroughbred. She looked younger than his father, though she had more lines in her leathery, tanned face. She leaned comfortably forward, resting one gloved hand on his knee. "Your *Dad* got them, Trev, wouldn't you know?"

"He's here?"

She nodded. "In the john at the moment. He just came in here and re-arranged one whole corner, pairing people off, shuffling them around until he got six together. Typical. But people pay attention to him. I guess we'd still be standing if it wasn't for him." She sighed with what sounded like fondness. "Miles always did play to the crowd. A certain haughty, colonel's air about him."

"Well, he wasn't a colonel."

"No, but he *looks* like one, even now. And he's always acted like one. That was one of our problems, of course," his mother said



lightly, tapping an ash into the ~~standing~~ chrome tray. Stanton wanted to ask her what made him change his mind, what made him come through this heat to a ceremony he didn't approve of; but it was possible that she could not know about his deception through the years, pretending that she was dead. Who could tell her that? She looked contented enough, had told Stanton how much fun it was to be back for a little visit—her words—and got on pleasantly with Jan. "Look," she said, "here he comes. Doesn't he look like he's inspecting, though?"

Stanton found him in the crowd without hesitation. Aloof, pleasant, parting the people with his steady walk and no-nonsense bearing. A little smile to one side, a nod to the other, a practised forbearance of odd accents and sweat and noise. *My God,* thought Stanton, *he's more at home here than I am.* His father had dressed in grey pants with a crease so narrow and straight that it seemed accomplished by plumb-line or mathematics rather than Gibson's Cleaners; the shirt was sharply white, smooth behind a dotted navy and red tie; and on his blue blazer he had pinned the ancient and intricate Death Or Glory of his regiment.

"*Well,* Trevor," his father bent slightly, shaking hands strongly, "this is the day, then."

Stanton shot to his feet, and there was more confusion and geniality as he introduced his father to Fred Bailey. But his father took over, immediately smothering his order for everybody to sit down with a warm smile. He wanted Jan on one side of him, Trevor on the other ("Good of you, Bailey, to fill in like this on such short notice"), and he was firmly placed beside Jan's sister.

"It was good of you to come, Dad," Stanton said. "I appreciate it."

His father's left eyebrow made a hairy hill, raised in surprise. "Why would I miss it? My youngest son marrying a bright, lovely girl."

Jan leaned forward and her gold hair braided a lanky tassel across the old man's jacket. "We thought this terrible heat might bother you. It's quite bad, isn't it?" But Stanton's father gave his indulgent chuckle.

"Nothing. Try southern India before a monsoon for heat! *Every* day rutilant with sun"—Stanton decided he had reached the *ru's*—"but one adjusts," his father ended evenly, glancing at Stanton's mother, whose eyes had assumed a glassy, polite boredom. She had heard it all before, and seemed already aboard the jet back to Calgary and Ralph.

"STANLON? THE STANLON PARTY?" The room fell still, ignoring the newly married couple ushered out gently before the magistrate.

"Could that be Stanton?" Jan whispered. She stood slowly, and Stanton saw his father's eyes swing to her in open admiration. "I believe you mean Stan*t*on," she said firmly, standing straight, and gracefully adjusting the heat-drooped rose on her lapel.

The office was dark-panelled, cool, stripped down of intimidating material. As if the city had cornered the market in chrysanthemums, another pot stood blazing on the corner of the desk. Before the judge lay a small worn book, a bulbous jug of water and a glass, and the marriage licence.

"Well, then, are we ready? Now if the witnesses will stand just behind—that's it. Fine. And the bride and groom here, please." The judge raised the book, and as he tilted his head back the light caught his round glasses, so that Stanton was confronted with a legal Daddy Warbucks, doing away with any solemnity he might have felt. It didn't help, either, to have Bailey, who had asked for permission, dipping and dodging clumsily around with his Instamatic, trying for artfully angular shots. "—do hereby pronounce you to be, man and wife." The judge moved around the desk to shake their hands, and Bailey contorted himself, streaming with sweat, to capture the moment forever on film. Stanton hugged Jan, kissed her a little self-consciously because her sister was snuffling just beside him. The whole thing had taken about ten minutes. He could not bear to look his father in the eye right away. Everything he'd said was true. The commotion, the garish yellow and blue waiting room, even the flowers.

They stood together for a time outside in the hall, laughing and talking, until Stanton's mother said she would miss her plane and Bailey said yeah, he had to go, too. Eventually, only Stanton and *his wife*—he said it in his mind, carefully and wonderingly—were left with his father.

"It wasn't what you wanted, Dad, but I'm damned glad you were there. Can we drop you somewhere?"

"No, no. I think I'll just rattle around down here for a while. It's been some time since I came downtown. It's changed." He said it heroically, something he was more apt to do with simple phrases, but tinged slightly with annoyance, as though he should have been consulted. "I may surprise you one day, and take an apartment down here. You know, it's not always good to live too far out."

When they turned at the stairs to wave, he was examining the stalled golden cage of the original elevator, suavely lecturing someone they could not see on the joys of antiquity.